

Gender, and women's political activism: Insights from small states

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Abstract: This article discusses the gender dynamics of women's political activism from the vantage point of small states. While women tend to be globally underrepresented in politics and parliaments, small states have specificities which ultimately affect women's political participation and presence. The undercurrents of small scale lead to limited anonymity in the societies of small states, which has a significant gender dimension. Small scale also causes greater resistance to cultural change, including progressive change towards gender equality and women's political representation. Women therefore face greater odds to make inroads in the political sphere in small states due to the specifics of small scale.

Keywords: civil society organisations, culture, gender, politics, representation, small scale, small states

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Introduction

What is distinctive about gendered dynamics in small states? There is no easy answer to this question as the scholarship on small states so far has a rather slim coverage of gender dynamics in these spaces. This is indeed an area which carries tremendous potential for further research. In their seminal article on 'Why small states offer important answers to large questions', Veenendaal and Corbett (2015, p. 527) highlight the absence of small states from mainstream comparative political science. They also note that minorities are more often marginalised in small states as the latter tend to have powerful cultures of compliance that leave little space for pluralism and dissent (Veenendaal and Corbett, 2015, p. 539). Following from the salient issues raised by Veenendaal and Corbett, in this short piece, I attempt to explore some of the insights that small states offer on the issue of women's political representation. While women have been historically underrepresented in politics globally, small states have specific dynamics which make a notable contribution to the body of knowledge and theorisation on gender and politics.

A principal characteristic of small territories is their small-scale societies due to their small populations (Benedict, 1966, p. 33). These societies tend to become "highly personalised" in the sense that there is a need to develop 'managed intimacy' (Bray, 1991, p. 21) because anonymity is a rare commodity in these spaces and places. Veenendaal and Corbett note that the practice of politics in small states remains dominated by elites and localised loyalties and that personality politics undermine the consolidation of national-level bureaucracies (2015, p. 539). The significance of personality politics in small states is thus heightened and the role of the individual takes on greater salience (Sutton, 2007). As such, the impact of negative campaigning can be particularly detrimental in small states where communities are small and relations are closely knit. In Mauritius, for example, during the electoral campaign leading to the 2005 election, caricatures of women politicians as prostitutes who were almost naked and dancing with male politicians were circulated. A woman politician

who was elected stated that this constituted character assassination against women and had affected her family, which was conservative (Chiroro, 2005, p. 12).

I argue that small scale carries a significant gender dimension in that men and women experience the effects of 'smallness' distinctly and differently in the political sphere due to their socially determined gender roles. In public roles and political positions, for instance, the private lives of individuals – and therefore the women and men who vie for or take up such positions – are often under intense public scrutiny. The form of scrutiny is often gendered, with women being put under greater 'moral' scrutiny in relation to their personal and intimate lives, whereas the focus in the case of men tends to be on the 'morality' of their public life or roles. In Papua New Guinea, the marital issues of Loujaya Kouza, a member of parliament from the Lae Open constituency, were widely reported on after she requested an Interim Protection Order against her husband; calls were made for her to resign from her ministerial position (Baker, 2018, p. 556). In fact, criticism of women politicians in small states is often articulated in terms of their status as role models for women.

Smallness also affects women's political activism and collaboration with civil society organisations, including women's organisations. These organisations play an important role towards enhancing or supporting women's political participation and eventual political presence. It is important that civil society organisations remain non-partisan and unbiased so that they are not labelled as affiliated or favouring one political party over the other. In small states, however, communities are closely knit, and economic mobility is, at times, dependent on political affiliation (Hesse-Bayne and Kremer, 2018). It becomes difficult for civil society organisations to come across as neutral, thereby diluting their lobby and voice. This situation can weaken women's lobbies for greater political space, especially if their involvement with politics and politicians comes across as partisan.

Small states, just like large ones, often have historically tightly knit male elites in the political and economic spheres with ingrained masculine cultures, resulting in a lack of gender diversity (Park and Jakstaite-Confortola, 2024, p. 3). Small states also tend to have a more conservative political culture, causing change to be an uphill battle as smallness renders culture more resistant to change. Small size leads to social compression, stronger personal contacts, and wider role enlargement, role diffusion, and role multiplicity (Baldacchino, 2000, p. 73). These features facilitate the fusion of individual into group interests, while at the same time enhancing the supervision of group discipline and compliance with any agreements made (Baldacchino, 2000, p. 73).

Pressures to avoid disagreements in these societies may imply that individuals who overtly express opposition or dissent run the risk of social exclusion and ostracism (Baldacchino and Veenendaal, 2018, p. 343). In Belize, women candidates were concerned about the security of their livelihoods and how the media would treat them (Hesse-Bayne and Kremer, 2018, p. 180). Even for women politicians who are committed to these gender equality goals, it is a struggle to balance this work with the work of representing their own constituencies (Baker, 2018, p. 559). Therefore, the task of women in small states attempting to defy social and gender norms that favour men towards political positions will be more arduous than for women in larger states due to the social effects of small scale. This societal characteristic of small states is therefore heavily impregnated with gendered consequences, especially towards women's political representation.

Although there are no big divergences in the factors affecting women's political participation in small states and the rest of the world, one cannot discount the fact that the small-scale factor causes greater resistance to change in cultural and gender norms. In fact, Veenendaal and Corbett (2015, p. 540) noted that women's representation in the small island states of the Pacific were among the worst performing in the world. In the case of island states, Karides (2017, p. 35) contends that adhering to embedded beliefs and practices would imply clinging to hierarchies around race, class, and gender, and sustaining patterns of discrimination, thereby resisting progressive change while perpetuating inequities. Smallness therefore thwarts progressive change, particularly when it comes to women's political representation.

Conclusion: women under greater scrutiny

Due to limited anonymity and close monitoring of activities and movements of people, women are under greater scrutiny from family and society in these societies, which leads to additional pressure on those who choose to defy tradition and culture and to venture into the male-dominated political sphere (Ramtohul, 2020). Women living in small states therefore face greater odds towards attaining political leadership and parliamentary positions because of resistance to cultural change in these states which would challenge gender hierarchies in positions of power. A close scrutiny of the gender dimensions of politics in small states thus unravels key factors that are more pertinent to small scale and which limit women's political presence there. Studying these issues is an imperative for identifying the significance of the 'small state effect' in wider debates on gender, voice and political representation.

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